"HELLO, WORLD!"

Tricks with a little black box

BY DAVID PARRY

It was almost midnight and there was still no sign of Sam. I was sitting where he'd told me to meet him, in a window booth of an A & W restaurant on a four-lane street lined with parking lots and completely unblemished by trees. It was a great spot for Sam to suggest. All that open asphalt landscaping would let him pick out anyone coming or going. If I had doublecrossed him and not shown up alone, Sam would have seen and disappeared.

Sam had good cause to be careful. He's a hardcore "phone phreak" – a 30-year-old electronic mastermind who's part of a steadily growing underground that toys with the world's telephone network in the same way other hobbyists play with paint-by-number sets and electric trains. A properly-outfitted phreak can link an ordinary household phone to almost any other number on earth, and never be billed for the call. He can also ring up circuits known as loops in cities thousands of miles away. On them he can hold a toll-free conference with other kindred souls about such things as the quality they're getting on their illegal satellite calls across the ocean.

Phone phreaking – they prefer the "ph" spelling because of the sideshow connotations of "freak" – has been going on in one form or another for about 12 years. But only recently has it threatened to get out of hand. Canada's telephone companies are alarmed at the increased use of "Blue Boxes", "Black Boxes" and assorted other homemade gizmos stuffed with transistorized wizardry to dupe long-distance billing computers.

Now the phone companies are striking back. A Vancouver photographer working in California became the first adult in Los Angeles to be convicted of defrauding the telephone company with a Blue Box. In Toronto, a 20-year-old blind university student had his phone pulled out after Bell security agents monitored his line and heard what they believed to be illegal activity. Another Toronto student was arrested for "theft of telecommunications", a violation of Section 273 of the Criminal Code. Maximum sentence for theft under $200 is two years; for theft over $200, ten years. (The student, Frank Schaedlich, 20, pleaded guilty and was placed on probation for two years.)

Small wonder Sam was taking no chances. We had talked several times on the phone about his activities, but always Sam had called me. All I'd learned about the man himself was that he used a phony name and his work had something to do with electronics. Sam, on the other hand, had no way of knowing how far I could be trusted. When he agreed to a face-to-face meeting, he insisted it be on his terms.